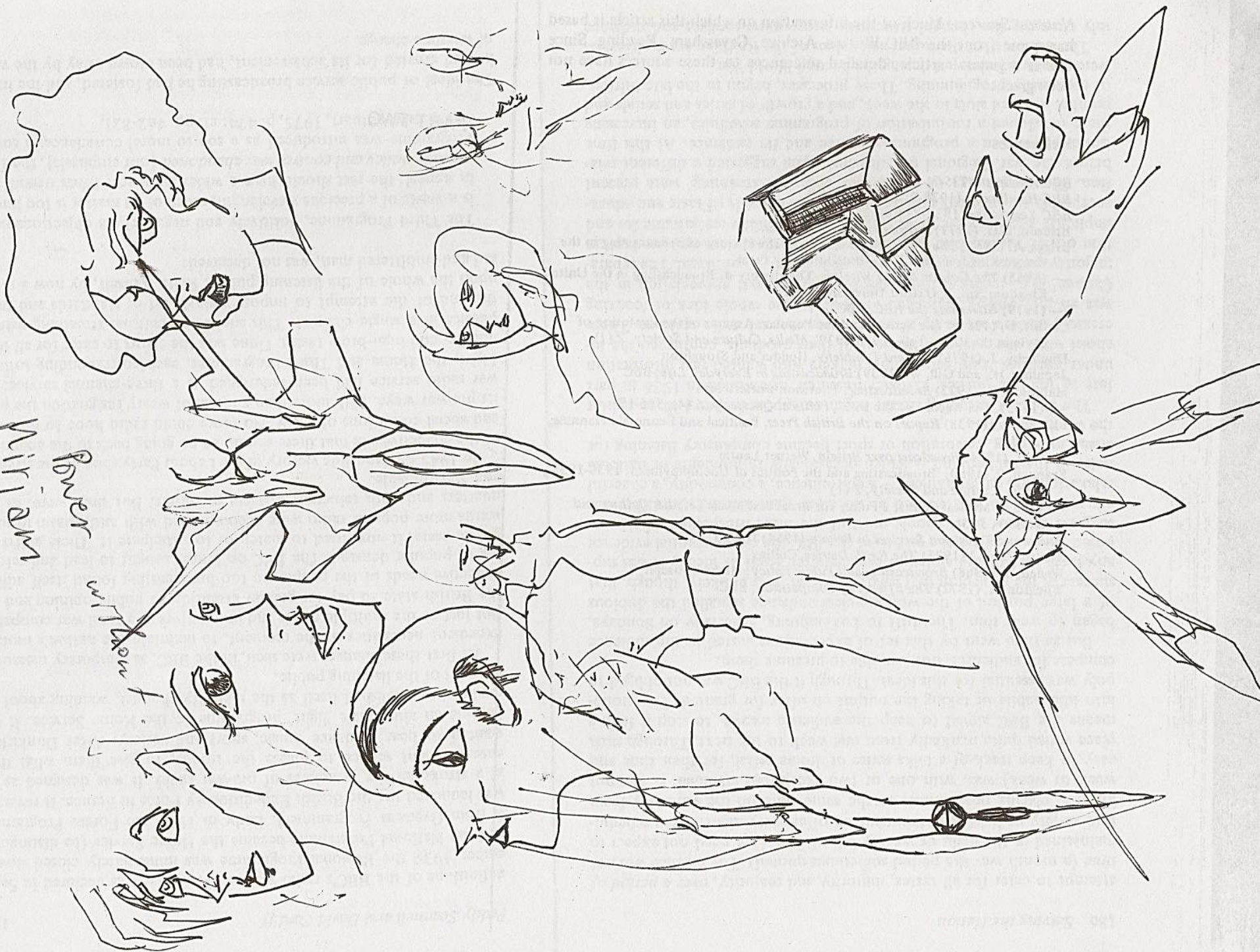


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## SERVING THE NATION: PUBLIC SERVICE BROADCASTING BEFORE THE WAR

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The history of the foundation of broadcasting in Britain is the history of a single institution — the British Broadcasting Corporation. Its general characteristics are well known. It enjoyed a monopoly of broadcasting until the state permitted commercial television in 1954 and commercial radio in 1972. It had a guaranteed revenue from the licence fee, freeing it from commercial pressure and the exigencies of profits. It was established as a service operating in the public interest, and was animated from the beginning by a high sense of moral purpose which it realised in giving an educational and cultural lead to its listening public. But how and why broadcasting took these specific forms and objectives are questions that this article considers.

### Broadcasting and the State

Control of wireless technologies rested with the state. When telegraphy was first invented, the Telegraphy Act (1869) was passed giving the Postmaster General exclusive right to transmit telegrams. Later his powers were extended to the licensing of wireless transmitters and receivers, forcing radio hams to buy a licence from the Post Office (Wedell, 1968, p. 56). In the early 1920s the Post Office was faced with demands from wireless manufacturers, who had begun to see the large-scale possibilities, for permission to broadcast. The Post Office, to avoid a decision between rival interests and anxious to avoid the confusion of the American 'chaos of the ether', persuaded the manufacturers to merge into a single cartel to whom the Postmaster General could grant a licence to broadcast. In the end they did, and formed the British Broadcasting Company, licensed to broadcast in 1922, with a working capital of £60,000 and revenues derived from the ten shilling licence fee for a receiver payable to the Post Office (half of which went to the Company), and from a percentage of the royalties on the receiving sets sold by the manufacturers (*BBC Handbook*, 1928, p. 37). Parliament had decided that only one licence to broadcast should be granted at any one time, so the Company was granted an exclusive licence to broadcast



for two years. This was extended for another two years after an official commission of inquiry (the Sykes Commission) had recommended that although the state should regulate broadcasting, it should not itself operate the broadcasting system. In 1925 the Crawford Committee, set up to examine the future of broadcasting, rejected free and uncontrolled broadcasting for profit (the American system) and a service directly controlled and operated by the state (Briggs, 1961, p. 330). It proposed that broadcasting be conducted by a Public Corporation acting as a trustee for the national interest, and consisting of a Board of Governors responsible for seeing that Broadcasting was carried out as a public service (*Sound and TV services*, 1964, pp. 2-3). It further recommended that the British Broadcasting Company was a fit body for such a task, and the Company duly became a Corporation in January 1927. Its Managing Director, John Reith, became the first Director General.

The BBC began to operate under the authority of two documents, each granted for ten years: the Charter, which prescribed the objectives of the Corporation, how it should function, its internal organisation, its financial arrangements; and the Licences and General Agreement between the Corporation and the Postmaster General. This allowed the BBC to establish broadcasting stations subject to the Post Office's technical conditions relating to wavelength and the power of transmitters. It prevented the BBC from broadcasting advertisements or sponsored material, and defined the percentage of the licence fee to be received by the Corporation. The state reserved the right to appoint (and dismiss if necessary) the Board of Governors; it also reserved an ultimate control over the BBC in the right to veto any material to be broadcast by the Corporation. In practice this power has seldom been used, and the BBC has usually been granted autonomy in its day to day programming and policies.

In normal times the state keeps the BBC on its toes not through the threat of direct intervention but in a number of indirect ways. First, the BBC has never had the right to broadcast in perpetuity. Its licence has always been granted for strictly limited periods (usually ten years), and its performance has always been subject to review. Various committees have reported on its progress and made recommendations, and to this date the Charter has always been renewed. The effect has been perpetually to remind the BBC of its dependence upon the state. Second, the state controls the purse strings; only it can increase the licence fee, about which it can of course prevaricate if displeased with the Corporation. Lastly, it controls the governing body of the BBC – the Board of Governors – which it can fill as it chooses.

The BBC was not, however, defined simply by the Conservative Government of the day. When John Reith became manager in 1922 the company became active in its own definition. In *Broadcast over Britain*,

written in 1924, Reith laid down unequivocally his concept of the BBC's role in broadcasting, and underlined the implications: 'It would not have been difficult', he declared, 'to make the service a clearing house for sensationalism.' But he and his colleagues had a high conception of the new medium's potential: 'Our responsibility is to carry into the greatest possible number of homes everything that is best in every human department of knowledge, endeavour and achievement, and to avoid the things which are, or may be, hurtful.' Reith was perfectly well aware of the implications of all this. The BBC was not merely a monopoly in a business sense, but a cultural dictatorship with the BBC as arbiter of tastes and definer of standards: 'It is occasionally represented to us that we are apparently setting out to give the public what we think they need, and not what they want, but few know what they want, and very few what they need. There is often no difference . . . Better to overestimate the mentality of the public than to underestimate it' (Reith, 1924, p. 37).

This side of Reith's concept of public service broadcasting as cultural enlightenment is well known. What has largely been forgotten, however, was his equal concern in those days to establish a genuine political independence for radio so that it might effectively realise its potential as an agent of a more informed and enlightened democracy. Through its universal availability, its capacity to relay important political events 'live' and as they happened, all members of society might have access to the processes that ruled their lives. The live coverage of the daily proceedings of the House of Commons was an idea widely canvassed in the BBC between 1924 and 1926. But more than that, by raising the level of knowledge, by presenting informed and balanced debate amongst political leaders, experts and authorities on the political and social issues of the day, radio might make an important contribution to the formation of a more informed and educated public opinion, a more active and participatory democracy:

Broadcasting brings relaxation and interest to many homes where such things are at a premium. It does far more; it carries direct information on a hundred subjects to innumerable people who thereby will be enabled not only to take more interest in events which formerly were outside their ken, but who will after a short time be in a position to make up their own minds on many matters of vital moment, matters which formerly they had either to receive according to the dictated and partial versions and opinions of others, or to ignore altogether. A new and mighty weight of public opinion is being formed, and an intelligent concern on many subjects will be manifested in quarters now overlooked. I have heard it argued that, insofar as broadcasting is awakening interest in these hitherto more



or less sheltered or inaccessible regions, it is fraught with danger to the community and to the country generally. In other words, I gather that it is urged that a state of ignorance is to be preferred to one of enlightenment . . . To disregard the spread of knowledge, with the consequent enlargement of opinion, and to be unable to supplement it with reasoned arguments, or to supply satisfactory answers to legitimate and intelligent questions, is not only dangerous but stupid (Reith, 1924, pp. 18-19).

Such arguments, which are to be found a little later in John Grierson's claims for the role of documentary film for instance, were based on a realisation that there was now, and for the first time, since the vast extension of the franchise in 1918, a truly mass electorate, the majority of whom possessed no formal schooling beyond the age of about fourteen.

Reith's efforts to secure the spread of knowledge and the enlargement of opinion were constantly checked and thwarted between 1924 and 1927. He wanted greater freedom for the company in the areas of news, talks and outside broadcasts to give listeners access to the political processes and debates of the day. In all these areas he was hampered and blocked by the powerful vested interests of the press and press agencies, the Post Office and the government, frequently acting in concert.

The General Strike (May 1926) brought all these issues to a head. That the BBC sided with the government in the matter is well known. It had no option. To have done otherwise would have jeopardised the very continuance of the Company and the new charter and licence, now nearing final preparation, which would transform it into the Corporation. Reith had worked energetically to persuade committees of inquiry, the Post Office and his own board of directors of the need to change the status and constitution of broadcasting. He had done so in the belief that it would bring a genuine freedom not only from commercial interests, but also from the restraints imposed till then by the state. He even hoped that by proving the 'responsibility' of broadcasting during the strike he would at last win the right to deal fully with the controversial political and industrial issues of the time. When he read the draft terms of the charter in late 1926 he was filled with anger and dismay. Controversial broadcasting and editorial news comment (the latter enjoyed briefly, in the absence of the daily press, during the strike) were expressly forbidden, and considerable chunks of the revenue from licence fees were to be pocketed by the state. Reith immediately tried to get these terms reversed, but the Postmaster General simply went behind his back and blackmailed Lord Clarendon (chairman-designate of the new Board of Governors) into signing the documents with the simple threat of sign or be sacked. When finally the charter and licence were publicly released as 'agreed documents' Reith's indignation knew no

bounds. He felt betrayed both by the government and the Chairman of his new board (cf. Briggs, 1961, pp. 354-60).

Thus it must be recognised that when the form and content of broadcasting took on a more settled and permanent form in the late twenties and across the thirties, what came together then was not in any sense a simple realisation and fulfilment of an initial conception of radio's social and political role in national life. In the process of continuing struggle and negotiation (particularly between 1924 and 1927) initial aspirations and intentions were modified, readjusted or thwarted. It was the government who set the terms for the Corporation, whose subsequent history was in part an accommodation to and acceptance of those terms. The independence of the BBC has always been a strictly *relative* autonomy; for while it has seldom been directly interfered with by governments (though the number of instances is greater than might be supposed), it has had to live constantly with the certain knowledge that if its activities should seriously irritate or anger the state, it can be brought to heel by a variety of direct or indirect pressures.

#### **Towards a National System of Broadcasting**

Between 1922 and 1924 19 'main' and 'relay' stations had been set up in strategically populous centres of England, Wales and Scotland. Between them they provided a service for nearly 80 per cent of the population. A network system was introduced, whereby local stations could take, via Post Office trunk lines, 'simultaneous broadcasts' of news and important programmes (a symphony concert, a talk by a national figure) from the London station. Alternatively any one station in the network might 'feed' the rest with one of its own local products. Thus Cardiff's rather successful Christmas panto, *Singbad the Wailer* (1925), was given a repeat performance on the network, 'flu permitting'!

The nine main stations in these early years produced most of their own material, with relay stations, supplied largely by London, producing a much smaller percentage of their own programmes. Their budgets were limited, and they very much depended upon what they could find locally in the way of talent (often amateur) or interest to make up their programmes. Inevitably they developed in themselves and in the areas they served a considerable degree of local pride. Their relations with the audiences they served were cosy and remarkably informal compared with radio a decade later. There were quiz programmes, competitions with cash prizes and even phone-in request programmes. In spite of difficulties in finding enough material to fill the hours each day; in spite of technical hitches (of which there were many); in spite of a growing trend towards duplication, the stations had each in their own way



adapted themselves to the areas they served, and offered not only entertainment but a public service to their community of a rather different kind to what was shortly to be installed in the reorganised system of distribution.

When Leeds put on a charity concert for ailing children, when Liverpool ran a series about the city past and present during its Civic Week, or when Sheffield let its university students put on a show in aid of local hospitals during rag week — these were unemphatic instances of a kind of local public service, rooted in the community, performed by radio in its infancy which has scarcely yet been recovered. Something valuable was lost, though it was hardly recognised at the time except by local people, in the growing centralisation of control and production in London, and in the decision to change the system of distribution which began to take shape there in 1925-6.

In Reith's mind *unity* of control (the monopoly) and *centrality* of control (in London) were inextricably linked. Unity of control, the absence of competition, allowed for the rapid, efficient and planned expansion of broadcasting. That was to be effectively secured by the imposition of a set of policies, a concept of public service, upon the whole system by a small nucleus of decision-makers headed by Reith and based in Head Office. The overriding argument in favour of central control was that it was ethically essential in order that 'one general policy may be maintained throughout the country and definite standards promulgated' (Memorandum of Information, 1925). This meant bringing all stations in line. Ultimately it meant their elimination. The regime of control was to replace informality by a studied formality; to replace local variety and differences by a standardised conception of culture and manners; to replace audience participation by a more distanced, authoritative and prescriptive approach to broadcasting; to replace ordinary people and amateur performers in the studios by 'authorities', 'experts' and 'professionals'. The diversity of the individual stations, and the sometimes heterodox activities of their directors, were carefully brought to heel.

By 1930 local radio had vanished. In its place was the National Programme from London and the Regional Programme produced from five centres serving the Midlands, North, South, West and Scotland (later Wales and Northern Ireland were added). This reorganisation, planned from 1925 onwards, was based on a number of factors. For technical and economic reasons it made better sense to concentrate on a smaller number of stations with high-powered transmitters to extend reception to the whole of Great Britain, rather than to go on adding to the number of local stations. Second, to allay the obvious criticism of the monopoly (that it restricted choice) it was necessary to provide listeners with an alternative choice of programmes. But thirdly, and in the end

most crucially, this greater unity and centrality of control permitted a more effective organisation of programme output to fit the concept of public service broadcasting.

In essence two different concepts of culture were articulated in the National and Regional programmes. The London service, in line with Matthew Arnold's ideal of 'sweetness and light', would provide the 'best' in music, talks and drama and entertainment. This ideal of cultural enlightenment operated within a larger ideology of nationalism, for the best meant the best of British. This was easily invoked in the domains of literature and drama, less so in the case of music. In this sphere the BBC sought actively to raise Britain from being a 'third class' musical nation to one that would bear comparison with other more evidently 'musical' European nations. The regional service, rooted in provincial centres which could not match (so it was assumed) the quality that London could tap, offered culture, in Williams's phrase, as 'a way of life'. It was intended to reflect the everyday life and variety of the areas it served.

It should not be thought that this system was either intended, or ever worked, as an equitable balance of forces between London and the rest of the country, between metropolitan and provincial interests and needs. The National Programme was, in every sense, the senior service, with the regions very much as juniors. There were frictions and tensions throughout the thirties between the dominant cultural prescriptions of London, and the subordinated (but insubordinate) intentions of the regions. One example must serve to illustrate the point. In the mid-thirties London had scheduled a Sunday concert conducted by Casals and ordered all regional stations to take this 'top quality' programme unless there were very good reasons for not doing so. North Region had already filled this slot with a concert by a Merseyside group of unemployed musicians. They were very reluctant to drop this broadcast, which they believed was of great *social* importance for the region, in spite of strong pressure from London urging the *cultural* importance of Casals. In the end North Region had its way (cf. Briggs, 1965, p. 328), but in this one area of music a host of other incidents — most notably over regional orchestras — might be cited to add substance and detail to the differences and tensions between 'the margins' and 'the centre'.

The unceasing production and reproduction of material for transmission was a central problem of programme organisation and planning once the overall character of the channel had been determined. By the end of the 1920s the BBC had settled down to a pattern of broadcasting that remained unchanged until the outbreak of war — a policy of mixed programming both in the national channel and the regional alternative. Mixed programming offered a wide and diverse range of programme materials over the course of each day and week. Typically it included



news, drama, sport, religion, music (light to classical), variety or light entertainment. Not only did it cater for different social needs (education, information, entertainment), but for different sectional interests within the listening public (children, women, businessmen, farmers, fishermen, etc.).

The sum of the material transmitted on such a channel may be seen as amounting to a socio-cultural universe (a complete world) because the overall content or repertoire appears *exhaustive*; what lies outside the catchment of the channel (what is *not* broadcast) is not part of the 'normal' range of the social experience and needs of the audience as expressed in the sum of its contents. Thus the various single elements in the channel (the separate programmes) reveal their social significance when considered as a whole. Separately, the programmes point to different social needs and different listening publics; collectively, they reveal how the broadcasters conceived of the audience as a whole.

Any broadcasting channel is based on a set of assumptions about the particular audience for whom its bill of fare is intended; an audience which is constructed and continuously reproduced in the individual programmes and the overall repertoire that makes up the contents of the channel. Wireless reception, from its earliest days, had been naturalised as part of private, not public, life. The radio in the living-room was part of the furniture of domestic everyday existence. It was in this context that the BBC recognised and addressed its audience, not as an aggregated totality (a mass audience) but a constellation of individuals positioned in families. The home was an enclave, a retreat burrowed deeply away from the pressures of work and urban living, with radio as part of that cosy, domestic warmth. The social level of the ordinary English family, as typified in many instances, was within the lower and middle reaches of the middle class: Acacia Avenue or Laburnum Grove, the tree-lined suburbs of Greater London and the Home counties.

Radio, it was felt, enlarged and enriched the sphere of private life, linking it to the public world and its discourses, broadening horizons, extending informally the education of family members and providing them with new topics of conversation (cf. Jennings and Gill, 1939). The 'listener-in' was recognised as carrying a range of social interests and needs, as inhabiting a particular local community, as having domestic and social responsibilities both in the home and in the community; and beyond that as having a role to play – a more public role as 'citizen' – in the larger community of public affairs and national life.

The BBC saw its audience both as a unity and a diversity. It presumed a 'national community' whose general interests the BBC had a duty to serve: moreover it must always be the case that 'the general needs of the community come before the sectional' (*BBC Yearbook*, 1933, p. 37). As for those sectional needs (whether political – as between

different legitimated parties; or regional – as between different areas of the country; or cultural – as between high-, middle- or low-brow tastes) the BBC regarded itself as an impartial arbiter between their various claims, assessing their relative importance and catering for them accordingly. These policies were based on the basic principle 'that broadcasting should be operated on a national scale, for national service and by a single national authority' (*Yearbook*, *ibid.*, p. 14).

### The Determinations of Programmes

In this brief synoptic account of the social and political formation of broadcasting it is not possible to offer more than a hint of the rich, dense and complex histories of the major categories of programme output in all production centres, regional and national. Each area of production has its own history that must be grasped in its own terms and in relation to what is simultaneously taking place in other areas of output. The histories of talks, or news, or music (to take major instances) register separately and relatedly the continuing and conscious search for new and appropriate methods of production and styles of presentation – a process that is always and necessarily subject to a complex range of determinations; an ever shifting play of forces – external and internal – upon the level of production itself.

External pressures include those exerted by all the apparatuses and departments of the state and by the major political parties; by various lobbies and pressure groups (e.g. the press; entrepreneurs in the entertainment industries; composers, performers and music publishers . . . etc. etc.) defending interests which appear to them to be threatened by the activities of radio; and lastly, by the audience. More particularly they come from different (and antagonistic) 'taste publics' – dance band fans who complain of too much high-brow music, versus the 'serious' musical public who deplore the vulgarity of jazz, crooners etc. who flood the ether. More broadly they are from the general level of social, political and cultural 'tolerance', the normative (consensual) field of values, attitudes, beliefs and tastes to which broadcasting must be ever alert and sensitive as it partly adjusts to correspond with these dispositions and partly seeks to transform them.

Within the BBC economic, technical and staff resources in part constrain the limits of the practicable at any one time, but the major internal determination of production is shaped by the division of labour within the institution. Once established in 1927 as the Corporation, as a national broadcasting institution, the BBC embarked on the consolidation and expansion of its institutional position within the established social and political order. When Reith resigned as Director General in



1938 one newspaper congratulated him for making the BBC into a national institution as thoroughly typical and representative as the Bank of England — i.e. safe, responsible and reliable, a bed-rock guarantor of the nation's 'cultural capital', of the existing order of things. The question is *how*, by what material processes, was this achieved?

It was done through a careful and unceasing attention to all aspects of the organisation of the system of distribution, to the character of the programme channels, and lastly, crucially, to the form, content and presentation of the repertoire of material that filled those channels. Programmes remain the final register and bearers of institutional intentions and assumptions about the scope and purposes of broadcasting and about the audiences to whom they speak. Programmes are the highly determinate end products of broadcasting; they are the point of exchange between the producing institution and society. Judgements of the adequacy or otherwise of broadcasting's efforts are always, and rightly, based on them. So it was through the control of policy in relation to all aspects of programme output that the task of securing acceptance and recognition of the claims and status of broadcasting was performed.

The implementation of a coherent, corporate programme policy began in the days of the company, but was greatly accelerated thereafter. It required the establishment of more authoritative styles and modes of address in the announcing and presentation of programmes; the pursuit of social and cultural prestige in the fields of music and talks especially; the arbitration of the claims of different taste publics in a single national channel; the trimming of the wayward tendencies of individual programme makers or departments; the moulding of each area of output into the bearer of an articulate set of intentions and prescriptions, consonant with the ongoing work of other areas, collectively working together to produce, in a complex unity, the corporate ethos of public service broadcasting in the national interest.

To these ends Reith, in the early thirties, undertook the thorough reorganisation of the running of the BBC. The intention and effects of the changes he introduced were to remove control over programme decisions from the programme makers, and to deliver it into the hands of a small, elite nucleus of senior administrators and planners who now, in consultation with Reith or on their own initiative, determined the overall policy objectives of the BBC. By the mid-thirties the control of programming had slipped from the level of production to the newly installed level of administration. This was not achieved then, or ever after, simply and smoothly. To bring production in line new personnel were brought in from outside to establish orthodoxy; departments were split up, regrouped or dismantled; 'progressives' were eased out of programme making by 'promotion' or sending them elsewhere.

In the mid-thirties the BBC was a troubled, unhappy place in which to work. It was riven by internal feuds and rivalries; by dissatisfactions with conditions and terms of employment, pay and promotion; by the lack of adequate mechanisms for bargaining and negotiating on these matters; by corporate meddling in the private affairs of staff members (to get divorced, or to be cited as co-respondent in divorce proceedings was to court dismissal); by the growing gap between rulers and ruled within the institution. By the end of the decade programme makers had become, in the phrase of one contemporary, 'the creative helots' of broadcasting. They had begun to learn the rules, to recognise 'what goes' and what does not, to accept the limits of the possible, to develop routines and strategies that would protect their flanks and smooth their way to a less troubled life within the institution. 'Referral up' became a standard practice — i.e. seeking 'guidance' and official clearance from senior personnel on potentially 'sensitive' subjects. Greater care was now taken to anticipate in advance the likely impact of programmes on those influential quarters that might take exception to them and kick up a public fuss. Programme proposals from producers were now tempered by an inbuilt sense of what might be acceptable to the rulers of the BBC. In early 1939, for instance, Lawrence Gilliam (in charge of Features, London) floated the idea of a topical series on the lines of the American *March of Time* programmes. He recognised that for policy reasons the major political events of the time would be out of court, but still felt this left a vast field of non-controversial issues which could be worked up into a regular features series. 'If we can prove to the authorities that we can tap a new source of topical features, without running them into a lot of trouble, we can go a long way to filling one of the Corporation's biggest gaps — that is, topicality' (Gilliam to Midland Region Director, 1 March 1939). A them/us mentality, producers trying to steer their way round the authorities by adapting their ideas to what 'they' might accept, had become a reflex way of thinking.

The play of all these forces, upon and within broadcasting, comes to bear on the level of production. They are the real, material determinants that constrain and shape what is finally delivered to audiences. A full and detailed examination of these processes at work in all major areas of programmes cannot here be attempted. Three brief sketches of some of the work of the Talks, News and Variety departments must serve to give substance to the bones of these arguments.

#### *Talks and Controversy*

In 1928, after further pressure from Reith, the government agreed to lift the ban on the broadcasting of controversial matter for an experimental period. Though it never subsequently happened, it was made quite clear at the time to the BBC that it was on probation, and that



this new freedom might be revoked if it was not discharged with due responsibility. The lifting of this ban brought the Talks Department forward as a crucially sensitive area of programme output, for upon it now devolved the delicate task of finding new ways and means for the balanced presentation of contentious political, economic and social issues. It is not surprising that it dipped its toes into the chilly waters of controversy gingerly at first.

It would begin by the gradual and experimental introduction of political and economic controversy on clearly defined occasions with adequate safeguards for impartiality and equality of treatment. Religion would still remain, by Reith's fiat, outside the pale of strife. Apart from straight talks or lectures by individual speakers two other methods of handling controversy were favoured. The first method was to hold debates in which the topics should be carefully worded so there would be some inherent equality in the contending opinions. The debaters should be well matched and balanced. The other method was 'the discussion', defined as 'challenging and opposing points of view expounded in prepared statements in sequence' (*BBC Handbook*, 1929, p. 41: cf. Cardiff, 1980, pp. 36-40). Gradualism was the watchword. Controversy would not dominate the activities of the talks department. For the most part it would continue to graze in safer pastures, 'to interpret the vast field of interests and knowledge which is happily beyond the frontiers of acute current partisanship' (*Handbook*, *ibid.*).

By 1931 Britain was in the throes of political and economic crisis, both a result of the catastrophic world-wide slump in trade. As the effects of the recession bit deeper the department took the plunge. Major series on housing, unemployment, trade unions, modern industry (from the employee's point of view) and 'the condition of England' question addressed themselves to the urgent problems of the day. Under the direction of Hilda Matheson (1927-31) and Charles Siepmann (1932-5) the talks department shared a common commitment to radio as a new social form of communication, and a common interest in developing new and effective means of communication via the spoken word. These talks series introduced new and direct methods of social reportage: eye-witness, first-hand accounts by BBC staff 'observers' of slum conditions in Glasgow, Tyneside and the East End; the unemployed themselves at the microphone to describe what it was like living on the dole. Through such programmes radio now began to enter into the very fabric of political life, becoming material evidence — appropriate as ammunition in quite contradictory ways by government, political parties and audiences — for debate and controversy.

For Hilda Matheson they demonstrated and confirmed the social role of broadcasting as a mediating agency between the state and the people; they were a means of bridging the gulf between expert and

citizen, and of reducing the awkward time-lag between perceiving a remedy and making it understood. What they more exactly did, through exposing the very urgency of the problems, was to point to the inadequacies of the remedies proposed by the National Government which was far removed from Matheson's idealistic conception of 'the modern state' (she had, like a true progressive of that time, the model of Stalin's Russia in mind) (cf. Matheson, 1933, pp. 95-7). What was not anticipated was the extent to which such series, on housing and unemployment particularly, might affront the ignorance and prejudices of the middle-class listening public or tread on official toes. There was an increasing rumble in the Conservative Party and in the popular press that the talks department was run by a bunch of lefties, a view which Reith increasingly shared (for a full account of these issues cf. Scannell, 1980).

Things came to a head in 1935, a year in which the BBC, its charter and licence up for renewal, was under the scrutiny of a government committee of inquiry (the Ullswater Committee). At such a time Reith did not want trouble in the ranks for there were quite enough complaints and criticisms (particularly on regional and musical policies) floating around in the various submissions, written and verbal, to the committee from lobbies and pressure groups. In the summer a second major reshuffle took place in the BBC which firmly installed a new hierarchy of administrators and planners in charge of programme planning and policy. At the same time the talks department was dismantled and key members of staff were 'promoted' to posts which took them a very long way from Broadcasting House (New York, India or Manchester). Later in the year the BBC was compelled by the Cabinet and the Foreign Office, against the unanimous will of the Board of Governors and the General Advisory Committee, to cancel a major talks series, *The Citizen and His Government*, because it included a Fascist (Oswald Moseley) and a Communist (Harry Pollitt) amongst its speakers. The BBC was forbidden to make it known publicly that the Cabinet had exercised its power in this case. It must appear as a voluntary decision, 'freely' taken by the BBC in the light of the general political climate in Europe (cf. Briggs, 1979, pp. 198-201).

Hilda Matheson, who had resigned from the BBC a few years earlier in an atmosphere of intrigue and bitterness, described the dismembering of the Talks Department as 'a dispersal and disintegration unparalleled in any other department... which has not been without consequent loss to the common body of experience, techniques and tradition'. In the autumn of 1935, she saw signs already of 'a widespread arrested development' (cf. Matheson, 1935, pp. 512-14). For the next few years the department, confused and demoralised and lacking any decisive leadership, contented itself with safer, less controversial subjects. In the



later thirties the most striking things about the work of talks (and features) in London is an *absence* – the lack of any programmes dealing with the major political and social issues of the time.

In the second half of the decade the focus of politics had shifted from internally divisive domestic issues (the recession, unemployment) to foreign affairs (the rise of Fascism, the threat of war in Europe). In the aftermath of its success in *The Citizen and His Government* affair, Chamberlain and the Foreign Office, by a discreet blend of force and persuasion, effectively prevented the BBC from giving access at the microphone to any voices opposed to the official policy of appeasement. As Hitler marched into Austria (March 1938), the talks department was running a major series called *The Ways of Peace*. By the time Munich arrived (September/October 1938) there was widespread dismay at all levels of the BBC, in the provinces as well as London, at what the ex-head of News (now Director, North Region) called 'a conspiracy of silence' in which the BBC was an increasingly unwilling and reluctant partner.

#### *News, Press Agencies and the State*

The development of the BBC's news service is an exemplary instance of the effects of external pressures on the formation of a major area of broadcast output, and of the BBC's continuous efforts to overcome them. In 1922, before the British Broadcasting Company came into being, the Post Office, the press barons and the news agencies had fixed it between them that radio would not develop its own news service in competition with the newspapers, or in any other way threaten their interests. When it began broadcasting the new company was allowed only to deliver news bulletins written and supplied, for a flat annual fee, by Reuters (incorporating material from the other agencies). These could not be broadcast before 7 p.m. to prevent them damaging the market for evening newspapers. Even under such severe restraints the BBC was able by little and little to impose something of its own ideas of 'news values', tempered by its understanding of its listening audience, upon the material supplied by the agencies. There should be no sensational stories of crime, violence or disaster; 'human interest' stories should be avoided; strict balance should be observed in the presentation of political (i.e. party) coverage.

It was the General Strike of 1926 which showed everyone – the public, the government, the opposition, the labour movement as well as the BBC – the critical importance of radio news in a moment of crisis. The BBC learnt many lessons from the strike, which had a lasting impact on its subsequent relations with, and attitudes towards, the British state. In particular it had enjoyed a brief freedom to produce – with the 'help' of the state – its own news and comment. From this

moment onwards its long-term objective was to regain that freedom.

By 1930, after protracted and tortuous negotiations with Reuters, the BBC secured the right to edit and write its own news bulletins. Under the terms of a new agreement, the agencies installed their tape machines in the BBC and provided along with these the full supplementary service they offered to the press. From these sources a tiny News Section began to compose the nightly bulletins for broadcasting. Up to 1934 the news section was part of the much larger talks department who seem to have treated it in cavalier fashion as a dumping ground for short talks they could not otherwise fit into their schedules. In 1934 John Coatman was appointed to the new post of Chief News Editor. He had previously been a Professor of Economics at London University, and before that had worked in the Indian police service. His appointment not only acknowledged the increasing importance of news: he was also brought in as a right-wing offset to counterbalance the left-wing tendencies of the talks department (Briggs, 1965, p. 147). A year later, under pressure from Coatman, news became a full department in its own right.

Though Coatman himself had no journalistic experience, under his guidance, and from 1938 under R.T. Clarke (ex *Manchester Guardian*), a more fully professional approach to radio news began to develop. Staff numbers increased from six in 1934 to thirty by 1939. Journalists from the newspapers were recruited to supervise and edit Home, Foreign and Sporting news. Though the bulk of the material used in the bulletins still came from agency tapes, eye-witness reports, recorded actuality and news talks were now regular features in these years (for a useful account of this period cf. Dimpleby, 1975).

Such a brief summary conceals the continuing process of negotiation and struggle behind the scenes with press interests and the state over the nature and scope of the BBC's news service. One concession made by the charter in 1927 had been the recognition in principle of the BBC's right to establish its own news-gathering facilities. Though largely dependent on agency material throughout this period, there was, after 1927, a continuous effort to either supplement or by-pass this material by obtaining information direct from official sources. At this moment the organs of the state were themselves embarking on the systematic management and control of publicity and information for the media. The spearhead of this quite new trend was the Empire Marketing Board under Stephen Tallents (appointed as the BBC's first Public Relations Officer in 1935), though the Foreign Office had long maintained close links with the foreign correspondents of the serious press. By the early 1930s all major state departments had installed Publicity and Press Officers to release information, to organise publicity for departmental campaigns and to promote, via formal and informal channels, the policy



objectives of the department (cf. PEP Report, 1938). The BBC worked hard and long to establish and maintain routine and continuous links with state departments, the Prime Minister's office and other authorities (e.g. the GLC, Scotland Yard) on the same footing as the press. Since departmental press releases were usually given in the late afternoon the BBC was advantageously placed to nip in and pick the plums for its evening bulletins ahead of the morning press. But the agencies retaliated by slapping embargoes on such releases, labelling them 'not for Broadcasting' before the following day. Across the whole of the thirties there were continuing efforts by the BBC to negotiate with agencies and the government an agreed code of practice for the classification of official publicity and news releases.

It made little headway. The government's attitudes to radio news had been formed in the General Strike. It saw it as, particularly in moments of crisis, a malleable instrument for the advancement of its own purposes. There is little doubt that in many instances the organs of government and the state, along with other authorities and powers that be, successfully 'used' the bulletins in various ways: to promote their own campaigns and projects, to 'correct' errors in press stories, and in critical moments (such as 1931) to paper over the cracks in the social structure (and official policies) by appealing for calm and national unity. The BBC was guileless in allowing itself to be so used in the early thirties. It hoped, by currying favour with the authorities, to steal a march on the agencies and newspapers. It saw itself as in partnership with the state and civil authorities in upholding the national interest and maintaining 'the settled community'.

Such complaisance must be understood, in part, as symptomatic of the political *naïveté*, compounded by the absence of any journalistic experience, of the handful of people working in news. They were grateful for any crumbs the state supplied, and petulant when it turned to feed the press instead. For if in moments of crisis the state favoured the more reliable medium of radio, in normal times it prudently favoured the senior news medium which it had wooed, cajoled or threatened for centuries. Newspapers were much better placed to kick up a public fuss than the BBC. The Corporation had yet to grasp the extent of the state's power over it, or that it might be being used by the state for purposes and policies that did not square with its own concept of service to the nation.

The loss of innocence came a few years later, over the government's appeasement policy. From mid-1937 the BBC's senior management had been making contingency plans for broadcasting in wartime based on the assumption that a European war was imminent and inevitable. By the summer of 1938 these plans, down to the fine details of wartime salaries, had been accepted by the Cabinet and ratified and agreed by

the BBC's management boards. Yet all this time its public stance had been to acquiesce in Chamberlain's foreign policy and to promote the illusion that peace might still be preserved.

The Munich crisis brought this contradiction to a head. For the News Department it finally revealed the complete inadequacy of agency coverage of foreign affairs. The serious press, through its special correspondents, had provided a far fuller and more authoritative coverage of the crisis. From this moment News resolved to develop its own staff correspondents; in the meantime, it despatched what resources it had (Murray, Dumbleby and the recording van) to Czechoslovakia for up-to-the-minute reports on the aftermath of Munich. At the same time its resolve was stiffened to keep on plugging away at the truth, no matter how unpleasant. Night after night, in early 1939, the bulletins contained recorded extracts of the live speeches by Hitler and the Nazi leadership which made plain their bellicose intentions and the imminence of a European conflict. This provoked an extraordinary backlash in the Tory press. For the whole of February 1939 the letter columns of *The Times* were filled with an avalanche of angry letters attacking the tenor of radio news: scaremongering, sensationalism, a left-wing bias against Fascist countries (old charges of a similar nature against news coverage of the Spanish Civil War were frequently dug up), subverting the good efforts of the government to establish friendly relations with Germany and Italy — such were the accusations in a babble of voices as the chorus of protest swelled and became ever more shrill. Other newspapers joined in with the *Daily Mail* as usual squealing loudest. In March the press produced a spate of 'BBC Suicides', of people alleged to have killed themselves in a fit of depression after hearing the news on radio. No similar instances of press suicides were reported.

After the General Strike Reith had tried to rationalise the role of radio in the matter by arguing that 'since the BBC was a national institution, and since the Government in the crisis was acting for the people ... the BBC was for the Government in the crisis too'. Munich was the first major crisis (Suez was another) which put to the test that syllogism as a definitive precedent for the role of the BBC in a national crisis. In this case the BBC came to see that the government, in spite of its own claims, was manifestly not acting in the national interest. Having grasped that nettle, the BBC saw its final responsibility as resting with and to the audience, not the state. It made strenuous efforts in those final months before war to alert the public to the true implications of Munich by trying to bring the opponents of appeasement (Eden and Churchill above all) to the microphone. It was prevented from so doing by the Conservative Chief Whip, by Chamberlain's Office and by the short-sighted opportunism of the Labour Party. It strove to produce talks series on home and civil defence to prepare the public for the outbreak



of hostilities. Again it was largely thwarted. Between the implacable obstinacy of Chamberlain and the crass blindness of the conservative listening public, the BBC was cast in the role of Cassandra — a soothsayer of hateful and unpalatable truths which were doomed to go unheeded.

### *Variety and Entertainment*

'Let there be no idea that this category is one given grudgingly and under pressure from the public or press', wrote Reith in 1928; 'To provide relaxation is no less positive an element of policy than any other' (*BBC Handbook*, 1928, p. 14). The defensive tone of the statement reflected the fact that there had indeed been public demands for an increase in the BBC's provision of entertainment. Newspapers had conducted somewhat unreliable polls which showed that variety and dance bands were among the most popular programmes, yet they made up a small proportion of total output. But the scarcity of light entertainment could not be ascribed entirely to the imposition of Reithian standards. It is true that limitations were placed on the amount of dance music broadcast. This could be produced cheaply; in 1934 it accounted for 9.5 per cent of the output of all stations but absorbed only 5.8 per cent of programme costs. (By way of comparison, serious music made up 14.4 per cent of output but costs amounted to nearly 30 per cent of the programme budget.) Variety, on the other hand, was the most expensive category of programme. In the same year, the proportion of time devoted to vaudeville, variety, revue and musical comedy was 4.8 per cent, but the proportion of cost was 15.3 per cent. In spite of this relatively high expenditure per programme, successive Directors of Variety complained of inadequate funds. They could afford to splash out on the occasional star performer but admitted that the bulk of their acts were second-rate. They could seldom afford to commission scripts from successful writers who could command far higher fees working in film or theatre than the BBC was prepared to pay. Overworked staff writers were depended upon for much of the original material in shows.

There were further limitations. Many top variety stars could not switch from the footlights to the microphone; more significantly, they feared that on radio they would quickly exhaust their material. In the old days, the music hall stars could rely on a limited number of routines to last them for almost a lifetime. They toured the provinces giving one-night performances, and the gaps between their appearances in any one place were such that their material always seemed fresh. Radio could not tolerate such a crop rotation of variety acts. Then there were the recurring disagreements with the leading theatrical agencies, Moss Empires and the General Theatre Corporation, who periodically banned their contracted artists from the microphone or refused permission for

relays from their stages. Even when such relays were permitted, they often made awkward broadcasting; loud applause might overpower the microphone and purely visual acts, like juggling or conjuring, were incomprehensible to listeners unless the clumsy expedient of using a commentator was adopted.

In the face of these difficulties, the BBC became determined to originate more of its own material and, if possible, to nurture its own star performers. But it was not until 1933 that a separate Variety Department was formed. Its first Director, Eric Maschwitz, adopted a number of strategies to improve the quality and range of broadcast entertainment. He moved both upmarket and downmarket in his search for new talent, recruiting stars of musical comedy, like Binnie Hale and Jessie Matthews, and at the same time exploiting the cheaper pool of talent available in Concert Party, a type of variety which had first made its appearance at seaside resorts in the 1890s. The end-of-the-pier shows made do with few props and a minimum of visual spectacle and were easily adaptable to radio. In 1932 the BBC had employed as a producer, Harry S. Pepper, who revived his father's *White Coons Concert Party* for radio. Other troupes such as the *Fol-De-Rols* and the *Air-Do-Wells* brought to the microphone fresh talents like the comedian Cyril Fletcher. There was a need for new blood. Maschwitz recognised that the BBC had come to depend too much upon a small group of radio 'regulars'. Some, like the dance band leaders Henry Hall and Jack Payne, had established a genuine national following through radio, but it was suspected that many of the comedians who had made their reputation in broadcasting were being overexposed. None of these comedians had their own shows. They were heard as individual turns in variety programmes. The true potential of radio comedy was not realised until the regular comedy series, with its stock characters and imaginary settings, began to evolve in the late 1930s.

Nevertheless Maschwitz did introduce a number of regular series which escaped from the stage conventions of the variety theatre and exploited the power of radio to evoke scenes in the listener's imagination. One of the few existing series was *Music Hall*, but the only consistent element in this show was the opening announcement and the signature tune. Each act was introduced without a trace of ballyhoo by an anonymous compère. But in 1934 Maschwitz created *Café Collette*, which featured a gypsy orchestra in the setting of a Parisian café. The 'Chef d'Orchestre' presented the show in broken English against a background of popping champagne corks and Continental chatter. It was claimed that many listeners believed that the café really existed and the format was adopted in other series. Another innovation was *In Town Tonight*, one of the earliest magazine programmes. This too began with imaginary evocation in sound; the roar of London's traffic and the



flower girl murmuring 'sweet violets' supplying an appropriate frame for a medley of talks and interviews reflecting the lighter side of metropolitan life. Such programmes not only began to convince the public that radio had an original contribution to make to entertainment; they were also remarkably cheap. Much more costly were the elaborate productions in which Maschwitz indulged his taste for sophisticated revue and radio operettas with a Ruritanian flavour. These met with critical success and some were even transferred to the stage. They helped to enhance the prestige of the BBC within the entertainment profession. But listener research was subsequently to show that these were the least popular categories of light entertainment.

The BBC's output of entertainment doubled between 1933 and 1936. The Variety Department was short-staffed but relatively free from bureaucratic interference. It was based outside Broadcasting House in St George's Hall, the site of the new BBC Theatre. Here staff relations were informal; producers were not kept to office hours, nor were their private lives subjected to administrative scrutiny. They were free to initiate their own ideas for programmes. However, while the administrators had few positive suggestions to make about the content of entertainment programmes, producers were expected to work within prescribed limits.

As long as the BBC was not originating much of its own variety material, there was little it could do to impose strict cultural standards. The susceptibilities of the family audience had to be taken into account and there was constant vigilance against 'vulgarity' and 'dirt' in comedy scripts. There was some tension between London and the regions over the supposed metropolitan bias of much entertainment output. In 1930 London suggested that there was too much dialect comedy in North Region variety. The North Region Director replied fiercely that this was 'really excellent British humour' and returned the attack. 'It is of course possible that London listeners appreciate large slabs of Cockney humour and American sob-stuff. If so it is time that a corrective of some kind were supplied' (Liveing to Wellington, 17 February 1930). Throughout its existence the BBC, in its role as guardian of the national culture, had tried to resist American influences on its programmes. The danger was explicitly recognised in 1929 when the Director of Outside Broadcasting prepared a report on 'the degree to which the BBC may be affected by U.S.A. control of world entertainment'. He warned that the BBC's monopoly would not necessarily protect it from the 'ramifications of the Transatlantic octopus', since American interests were investing in Britain and would attempt to establish monopolies of performers, writers, composers, plays and copyrighted music: 'it is even possible that the national outlook and with it, character, is gradually becoming Americanised' (Cock, Memorandum on American control of the Enter-

tainment Industry, 7 November 1929).

Although the *Radio Times* conducted a propaganda campaign disparaging the style of American commercial radio, the BBC found it difficult to supply alternatives to American popular styles and was often forced to reproduce them in a diluted and de-energised form. It asked singers not to adopt American accents, and tried to ban crooning altogether: but its efforts were hampered by the inability of the Music Department to supply a precise definition of the style to be avoided. While it could not avoid jazz rhythms, it encouraged their adulteration. Henry Hall was congratulated by the *Radio Times*: 'So tactful has he been in the compilation of his programme that he can now include an occasional "hot" number without being accused of betraying "negroid tendencies".' Though Maschwitz might turn to the Continent for inspiration, America continued to supply the models for new shows. The Canadian Carroll Levis imported the type of amateur discovery show originated by Major Bowes in the USA. The comedy series *Danger Men At Work* was a pastiche of Marx Brothers humour. The first domestic series, *The English Family Robinson*, was inspired by American soap opera, but replaced melodrama with tepid humour and a banality of incident.

In the late 1930s a number of factors led the BBC to take a more whole-hearted approach to the supply of entertainment. Listener Research, which began in 1936, forced producers to take the differentiation of audience needs and tastes more seriously. There was a growing awareness of competition from the commercial stations on the Continent. Reith's departure early in 1938 appears to have facilitated a process of popularisation. Resistance to the routinisation of schedules began to break down. By 1937 there were as many as 40 'fixed points' in weekday output between 6.00 and 10.30 p.m. As early as 1936 the Programme Board had moved towards the 'consecutive programming' of several light items in one evening. One symptom of the change in attitudes was the introduction of audience participation shows on the American model; quizzes, spelling bees, amateur discovery shows and sing-songs. The *BBC Handbook* for 1940 noted that

rightly or wrongly, it was being urged a year or two ago that the BBC was aloof from its listening millions, offering programmes with a complacent air of 'Take it or leave it'. These various experiments in 'Listener participation' with many others are evidence that the ice if it ever existed, has rapidly melted. New and friendlier contacts have been established on the air (*BBC Handbook*, 1940, p. 83).

The increased routinisation of schedules signalled the development of many new programmes with a serial or series format. In 1937 the Drama



Department successfully serialised *The Count of Monte Cristo*. A year earlier the BBC introduced the first variety series which rested on a repetitive formula. This was *Monday Night At Seven*, referred to at the time as a 'continuity show'. It consisted of a compendium of individual acts and regular features, bound together by a mellow-voiced 'singing commere'. The most enduring regular items were a weekly detective mystery, *Inspector Hornleigh Investigates* and the quiz, *Puzzle Corner*. There were also attempts to include short situation comedies such as *Thompson And Johnson*, a below-stairs farce involving a butler and a cook. Radio comedy came of age in 1938 with the start of a new continuity show, *Band Waggon*. This was also a compendium of items but between the acts, comedy was supplied by the 'resident comedian', Arthur Askey, and his playmate Richard Murdoch. Askey and Murdoch began to script their own material and soon evolved a method of production that could not have been applied outside radio. With a lavish and bizarre use of sound effects, they conjured up their household in the mythical flat above Broadcasting House, complete with their pets, Lewis the goat and the pigeons, Basil and Lucy. When the tenants hoovered the floor, the entire BBC Variety Orchestra, practising in the studio below, were sucked up to the ceiling. The programme was immensely popular and set the pattern for a whole tradition of British radio comedy.

#### *Some Versions of Culture: Talks, Music and the Regions*

Entertainment did not rank high on the scale of pre-war BBC values. In the more tranquil pastures of non-controversial talks the educative intentions of radio were carried through by recruiting the intelligentsia of the day to speak at the microphone. They trooped into the studios to pontificate on every subject, from 'The menace of the leisured woman' to the origin of species. Shaw, Wells, Keynes, Beveridge, the Webbs, Chesterton . . . all the great men of the day. There were very few women. They did not have, it was felt, the right microphone voice. The most portentous bid for prestige in this area were *The National Lectures* which began in 1928 and were designed

to hold the blue ribbon of broadcasting, and to provide, on two or three occasions in the year, for the discussion of issues of major importance and the interpretation of new knowledge by men of distinction in the world of scholarship and affairs.

By 1936 greater efforts were being made to make talks less boring for the ordinary listener. New styles of presentation were developed for 'popular' as distinct from 'serious' talks as the department became more keenly aware of the stratified nature of the audience, and greater con-

sideration was given to the point of view of 'the man in the street' (cf. Cardiff, 1980, on these points).

Dance band music, the cinema organ, musical reviews and operettas were not classified as music and were produced by the Variety Department. The Music Department dealt with serious music (symphonies, chamber music, opera and the *avant-garde*) and light classical and contemporary orchestral music. These two categories accounted, in the mid-thirties, for over 50 per cent of the output of the National Programme. There were two aspects to musical policy: to improve popular taste, and to present systematically to listeners the best music with the highest attainable standards of performance. The Music Department was more concerned with the latter; programme planners and policy makers with the former. The department showed increasing distaste for the notion of trying to popularise serious music, and preferred to address itself to what it regarded as the serious musical public. There was resentment at the ways in which the administration tried to impose 'missionary work' (i.e. reforming public taste) upon the department, which focused on the issue of 'jazzing' the classics. Official policy was prepared to countenance this distressing habit by arguing that a dance band version of a Mozart theme might lead the musically illiterate to a taste for Mozart. But the Music Department declared that jazzed classics were merely proof of the unbridgeable gulf between serious and popular music, and only confirmed the vulgar philistinism of the latter.

The pursuit of new standards of performance led to the establishment of the BBC Symphony Orchestra (1930), the first orchestra in Britain to offer full-time employment to musicians. It creamed off the best instrumentalists in the country, and provoked great hostility at first in the musical world as unfair competition. Sir Thomas Beecham and other conductors and orchestras, music publishers, teachers, entrepreneurs and performers all opposed the musical activities of the BBC as undermining active music-making, concert-going and job opportunities, though there is no evidence for the truth of any of these claims. London had considerable powers of musical patronage which it was unwilling to extend to the regions. It was argued by the regions and by Beecham and others that London's cultural monopoly was eroding the vitality of provincial music. In 1930 the size of the regional orchestras had been severely reduced, and it took considerable pressure from the regions and the musical profession to restore them to an adequate size (for details on music policy cf. Scannell, 1981).

Regional radio took some time to establish its presence, but by the mid-thirties it was showing signs of vigorous life. At its worst provincial radio lapsed into exaggerated insistence on its own identity by over-playing quaint local customs, dialect, etc. At its best it set up a quite different relationship with its audiences, more intimate and equal than



the National Programme. Since its major task was the reflection of the region it served, there was a much more conscious effort to get the microphone out of the studio and into real life; and some of the major developments in radio features and documentary took place in North Region, which had the largest regional audience of all. Under the leadership of E.A. Harding, who had been 'banished' to Manchester by Reith in 1933 after making a programme which upset the Polish Ambassador, a group of talented producers and performers began to make 'actuality' feature programmes which reflected back to the audiences for whom they were made aspects of their own life and experience. In this respect the work of D.G. Bridson and Olive Shapley was outstanding. In programmes like *Harry Hopeful*, *Steel*, *Cotton*, *Wool* and *Coal* Bridson found new ways of letting working people express their own opinions in their own words, and of expressing the strength of local community feeling in the people of Yorkshire, Lancashire and Tyneside. Olive Shapley pioneered the use of recorded actuality in programmes about shopping, long-distance lorry drivers, miners' wives, all-night transport cafés and homeless people. Such programmes had no equivalents in London. Some of her best programmes (on Mass Observation, on working-class life in Manchester) were topical and socially relevant in ways that London could not match in the late thirties. Nor was topicality confined to documentary programmes. The regions led the way in public affairs programmes such as *Midland Parliament* from Birmingham and North Region's *Public Enquiry*, while many of the radio plays produced in the regions were more socially engaged and to the point than the drama offerings of London.

In 1935 Charles Siepmann, who had just been unseated as Director of Talks, was sent to tour the regions and write a report. He was much impressed by their work, particularly Manchester, and his report has been described as 'a precise attack on the centralisation of cultural life'. When the activities of the regions are compared with those of London in the late thirties one has a strong impression of caution and stifled initiative at the centre and of experiment and innovation in the margins. The regions were less amenable to the dead hand of policy control. They were more in touch with their audiences, and more in sympathy with them, than London. Since there were only about a dozen staff in each regional station working relations were much more informal, and individuals had much greater freedom to decide on the work they wanted to do and then do it. When Grace Wyndham Goldie retired as radio critic for *The Listener* in 1939 she declared in her last article:

Let me before I die give one last shout about the importance of regional broadcasting. It is, I assure you, worth shouting about. Its effect on English life is only just beginning to be felt and is already

enormous. It is a side of broadcasting which I never see publicly discussed and the value of which I never see publicly recognised . . . In London the search is for the best possible play, feature, actor, talk or entertainment and to provide it for listeners. But in the regions there is something else. For it is the business of regional broadcasting to be expressive of the region. It is its business to be a channel for regional talent. But there is more than that. For it is also the business of the regions to express the everyday life of the region, its daily work, its past, its attitude of mind, and above all the quality of the people (*The Listener*, March 1939).

### Conclusions

The institutional presence of the BBC was massively established and accepted by the end of the thirties. Outwardly its policies, channels and programmes seemed to be permanently enshrined as part of the British way of life. Inwardly there were forces at work to undermine the solid foundations of this edifice.

In particular the contradictions between the attitudes of the BBC to its audiences, and of the audiences to the BBC, were becoming more apparent. The whole concept of public service, of raising the level of knowledge and taste, had rested on a set of expectations invested by the BBC in 'the great audience'. It must help to make the ideal work by attentive listening, by a careful selection from the goods on offer: 'on the other side of the microphone the listener must recognise that a definite obligation rests on him to choose intelligently from the programmes offered to him' (*BBC Yearbook*, 1930, p. 60). The listener must *listen*. 'If you only listen with half an ear, you haven't a quarter of a right to criticise.' Leaving the radio on all the time, as background noise, was frowned on. 'Think of your favourite occupation. Don't you like a change sometimes? Give the wireless a rest now and then.'

Both programme continuity and programme building (i.e. scheduling) were so arranged at first as to inhibit lazy non-stop listening. Properly speaking there was no continuity between programmes in the early thirties, no announcer's chat, previews of what was to come later, to maintain a smooth flow from one item to the next. Instead the spaces between programmes were deliberately left as little oases of silence, save for the tick of a studio clock, to allow people to switch off rather than stay on, or to let them recompose themselves after a particularly stirring play or musical performance. The concept of programme building was remote and alien from the present-day art of television scheduling designed to capture and maintain large audiences in prime time (cf. Wheldon, 1972). Central to the art of programme building was the



attempt to cater for all tastes, minority and majority, *over a period of time* (a month was the period sometimes quoted). The balance was not maintained in the daily or weekly bill of fare. One need not expect to find variety or light entertainment on offer every night. Fixed scheduling (i.e. placing programmes at the same time on the same day from week to week) was, with one or two exceptions, avoided. It was not easy to keep track of a talks series or drama serial, for their time and place varied quite markedly from one week to the next. Through such means the BBC aimed to keep the audience awake, to stop it falling into idle habits or taking the output on offer for granted. The monopoly was essential for this ideal. Through it the BBC was not obliged to compete for audiences, but was able to presume them.

But as time went by this set of expectations vested in the audience began to wear thin. The drift to Luxembourg, especially on Sundays, of a large portion of the working-class audience signalled the dubious success of the project in that quarter at least. It is unlikely, though, that any large part of the audience ever behaved itself as ideally it was supposed to do. Against the wishes of the BBC the circumstantial evidence suggests that for most people most of the time, irrespective of class or education, radio was treated as no more than a domestic utility for relaxation and entertainment – a convenience, a commodity, a cheerful noise in the background – which occasionally in moments of national crisis, mourning, celebration or sport became compulsory listening for the whole country.

The signs of creeping doubt begin to appear in the shift to lighter fare in the late thirties. Listener Research, established in 1936 in part under pressure from programme makers who wanted real information about what the audience thought of their products, confirmed the increasing inroads made by European commercial radio stations. There was an increasingly jaundiced attitude to the whole idea of 'coaxing Caliban' (i.e. trying to raise the level of cultural appreciation in the majority audience) in departments such as Drama or Music. The separation out of 'serious' and 'popular' styles of presentation and production implicitly accepted the need to find formats that were suitable for and acceptable to different publics with different levels of taste and education. The beginnings of social and cultural 'streaming' were present before the war. Regional broadcasting again suggested a different relationship between a programme service and its audience. At this time there developed a routinisation of programme schedules, an increasing number of fixed slots in the week, and a growth of series and serials and of continuity programming. These processes, begun in the late thirties, were greatly accelerated during the Second World War.

The war scuttled the hopes and values of the Reithian era by irreversibly changing the channel structures, programme services and audience

definitions of the BBC's radio service. When war was declared in September 1939 the Regional Programme was immediately closed down, and the National Programme became the Home Service (to distinguish it from Overseas Programmes). Early in 1940 the Forces Programme was launched for the British Expeditionary Force in France. It reversed at a stroke all the principles of pre-war radio. It was designed as an entertainment service to please the troops, to give them what they wanted to hear – dance music, sport and variety. After Dunkirk it became an alternative 'light' programme to the Home Service. It immediately established itself as the majority channel, winning about 70 per cent of the listening public.

At first these changes were seen, in the BBC, as temporary measures, expedient necessities of the moment, to maintain the nation's morale. But just as the multiple needs and imperatives of a total war compelled the British state to pay far greater attention to public opinion and the collective needs of the people, so too broadcasting found itself adjusting to popular demand. The BBC no longer sought to lead and reform public taste; it now tried to match or to anticipate it. These shifts towards more popular radio were accomplished with enthusiasm in some quarters and with reluctant distaste in others. But they were, in the end, unstoppable.

In 1945 the landslide victory of the Labour Party showed the strength of the collective will that there should be no going back to the economic and social conditions of 1939. No more could radio hope to return to its pre-war ways. With more than a touch of weary resignation the post-war radio service had been redesigned as a three-channel service: the Light, the Home and Third Programmes, each corresponding to low-, middle- and high-brow tastes. Gone was the effort to cater for all these publics in a single channel. This social and cultural streaming marked the end of the attempt to impose a single set of standards and tastes upon the whole of the listening public. Reith himself, by now a rather sad and embittered man, was not deceived:

The Third Programme, positively and negatively is objectionable. It is a waste of a precious wavelength; much of its matter is too limited in appeal; the rest should have a wider audience. *When overall programme policy and control was abandoned* [our emphasis], the Third Programme was introduced as a sop to moral conscience, a sort of safety valve (Stuart, 1975, p. 474: cf. pp. 462-82).

The ideal of public service broadcasting he had fostered, and the means he had created for its achievement, had been blown away by the winds of wartime change.



**Note on Sources:** Much of the information on which this article is based has come from the BBC Written Archive, Caversham, Reading. Since this is a general article, detailed references to these sources have not been given.

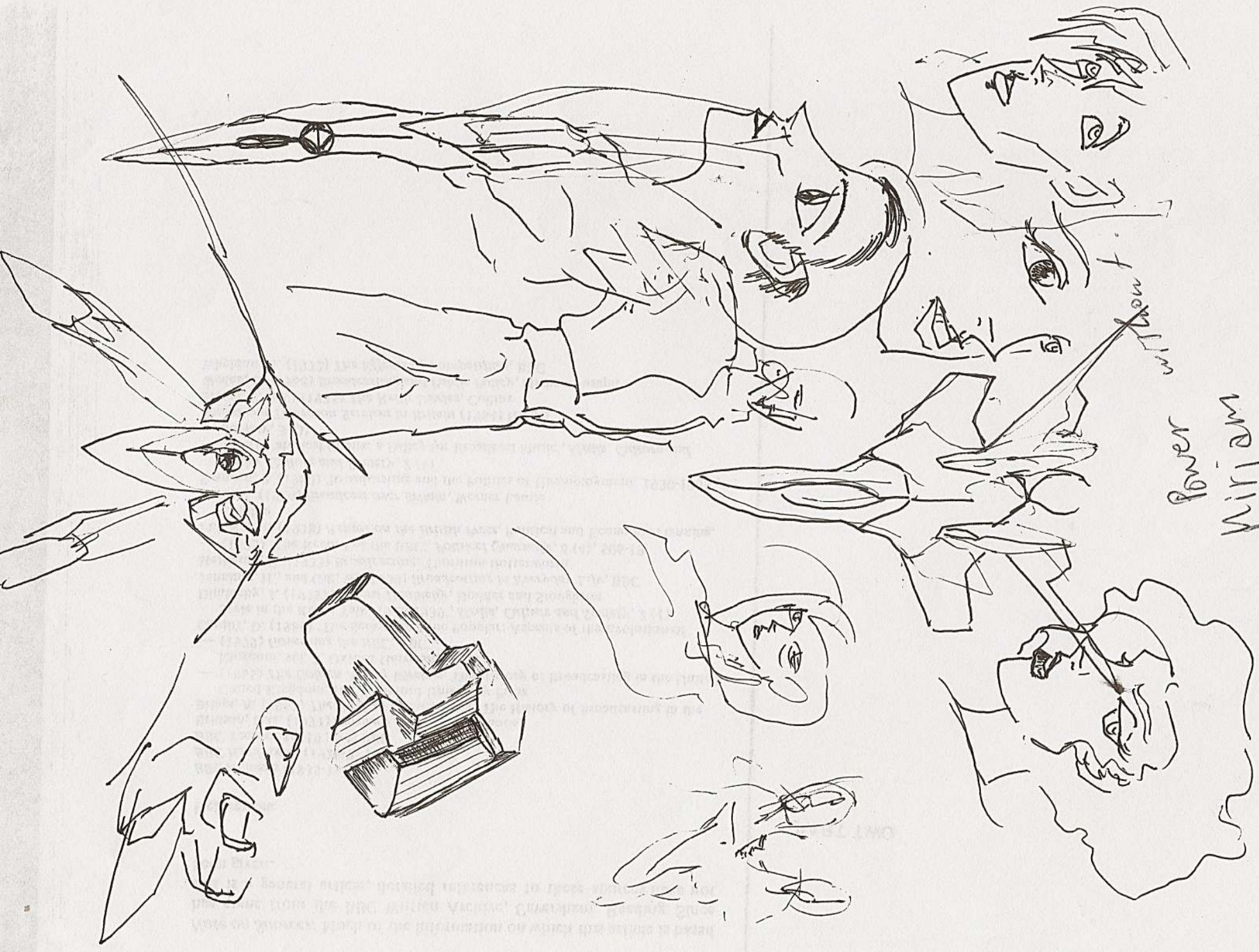
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## PART TWO

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